

Creative Leadership and Forum Theatre

An evaluation report for Odd Arts

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Executive Summary

Odd Arts Creative Leadership Programme

The programme is based on Odd Arts' adaptation of Forum Theatre techniques, delivered in care and prison settings.

The aims of the programme were to:

- improve learner experience and attainment through peer-led, issue-based arts projects
- increase confidence, creativity, communication and team-work skills, and therefore increase employability
- inspire learners to take control of their lives and recognise their own potential
- teach creative leadership skills and engage learners in the arts as a means of communication
- prepare learners for ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) Level 1 award in Peer Mentoring (<https://www.asdan.org.uk>).

Outcomes and Key Learning Points of the Programme

Relational, communication and teamwork skills

The following key outcomes of the Odd Arts Creative Leadership programme all demonstrate factors related to confidence, self-awareness and self-presentation, and, therefore, skills and capacities required to show creative leadership of self and others and negotiate entry into the world of employment:

The module:

- raised self-esteem, enabling re-evaluation of past 'failures' and future opportunities.
- developed awareness of imaginative approaches to life and problem-solving
- demonstrated to participants that creative activities offer opportunities for self-expression and peer recognition
- enabled participants' voices to be heard through theatre increasing their ability to communicate
- enabled participants to share and reflect upon apparently intractable issues that might otherwise have remained unexpressed.

- developed a feeling of empowerment and personal authority, highlighting aspects of leadership other than rule-bound discipline.
- Increased appreciation of the nature and benefits of teamwork.
- provided an opportunity for pleasure, freedom of thought and a sense of release that was obtained through being able to participate in the creative process

Venues

1. An education and training provider located in a city centre, for young people from 14+ who are not in mainstream education, employment or training (NEET Learners). The agency caters for a variety of young people of different ages, genders and support needs.

2. Care 4 Children, Hope House, Preston is a care setting for young offenders, with complex needs, consisting of a large house in a big garden and a separate school building. The group was all male, from African Caribbean and one from an Eastern European background who were in care partly because of criminal and high risk behaviours connected to gang culture.

3. Care 4 Children, Jefferson House, Winsford, was also a care setting for young people – a group of males who had been involved in sexually inappropriate behaviour that had aroused serious concerns and/or was of a criminal nature. The building was an old vicarage in a large garden, with a separate school building.

4. HMP Wymott, Leyland is a Category C prison including a wing for vulnerable prisoners. Two groups were run: (1) with Vulnerable Prisoners, ages 30-75; (2) Category C male offenders, average age 30.

Evaluation

The action research approach adopted was both formative and summative. The evaluation team undertook four in-depth case studies by observing the delivery of a short workshop based module in four very different settings. Data were analysed by a panel and iteratively fed back to Odd Arts Directors and Facilitators, leading to cycles of modification, implementation and further feedback. The key method used was observation, including film-based recording where possible, for panel analysis by the research team.

The full report documents the Odd Arts methods and processes and analyses the specific challenges and opportunities of each setting.

The specific aims of the evaluation were to:

- improve design and delivery of the sessions
- characterize Odd Arts' distinctive model of practice
- identify outcomes of the creative leadership module

- refine and embed self-evaluation skills among Odd Arts staff
- enable Odd Arts to better describe and advocate for what they do

Case Study Overview

Case Study 1. The sessions were for young people who had been excluded from mainstream education. They displayed restlessness, short attention span, lack of respect and tolerance for authority, inappropriate group behaviours and psychological and emotional difficulties. These young people, were not in a contained care setting. Forming a consistent work group was very difficult, as they came and went both for good reasons (like job interviews) and for other reasons that were less clearly legitimate. Nevertheless, they managed to pull off a compelling performance which was sufficiently focused to impress their audience of staff and peers.

In **Hope House (Case Study 2.)**, the Odd Arts facilitators drew on the rapping skills of the young people and incorporated these into the final performance. The use of offensive language in defiance of social norms was tolerated in the context of aesthetic expression. The energy, rhythmic skill and poetic originality of the rapping was praised, while the content became a cue for reflection on issues of gang culture that both attracted them and put them in danger. The young people developed a commitment to communicating with their audience in the course of the workshops and they used rap to offer a window onto a sub-culture that they found seductive, whilst exposing its violence and misogyny. There was a fine line in play and the content sometimes seemed to fall outside of the bounds of acceptability; but the facilitation provided a space where this could be recognised and self-censored by the performers themselves.

In **Jefferson House (Case Study 3.)**, the Odd Arts facilitators were faced with a highly vulnerable group of young people and tense staff, who did their best to avoid what might be described as ‘the elephant in the room’ – the anxiety aroused by their past sexual behaviour that had brought them into care. Furthermore, the implicit contract and relationship between the teacher in attendance and the Odd Arts facilitators had not been clarified and the researchers observed a degree of intervention which could be interpreted as unwitting competition. In this situation, the young people were less able to incorporate their real and pressing issues into the workshops. Nevertheless, the final performance was still strongly appreciated by the young people and the audience of parents and staff who attended it.

At **HMP Wymott (Case Study 4.)** the programme was delivered to two groups of prisoners: the first was a group of vulnerable male prisoners (VPs); the second was a group of male Category C prisoners with a range of undisclosed offences. Both of these groups performed well in front of peers and staff. The VPs appeared to be especially engaged and put in a polished performance, which included a significant contribution from the audience as ‘spect-actors’, (where members of the audience make alternative suggestions to alter the course of the performance and/or become actors in the play); the second group appeared to have fewer cultural resources but were nevertheless able to express themselves with authenticity

and honesty in a way which is difficult in the prison setting. Both groups received accolades from peers and staff, gave positive feedback and asked for more Forum Theatre work in the future.

Creative leadership

The leadership skills developed relied on the sense of personal authority, developed through the programme. The leadership model was based on leading through example, as demonstrated by the Odd Arts facilitators. The participants were able to feel and experience what it was like to lead themselves and a team to a performance. In doing so, they were also reflecting upon the relational and emotional skills that are important in such leadership.

The methods employed by Odd Arts proved to be a very effective way of supporting learners to consider how they might confront wider social challenges. They learnt critical self-evaluation skills and gained awareness of self-presentation. In a short space of time they gained significant cultural and relational competence which is likely to support them in finding employment, navigating the world of work and in honing life skills that will help them establish their place in society.

Introduction

This evaluation report focuses on a project undertaken by Odd Arts – an organization that works in criminal justice, community and educational settings with disadvantaged learners who have been challenged by education and training. They are themselves often challenging and rejecting of mainstream routes to employability.

Odd Arts began as the Odd Theatre Company. Its founders learnt the principles and techniques of Forum Theatre by working with Augusto Boal and began to develop their distinctive model in the favelas of Brazil and the prisons of Peru. They later adapted it to develop social and leadership skills among young people and adults in the criminal justice, education and community sectors in the UK. Forum Theatre is based on the principle of working with participants to stage real life situations which create new opportunities for dialogue that explore, challenge and change behaviour that has negative consequences for participants or society at large (Boal, 1979). This is an interactive form of theatre that enables the audience, as 'spect-actors' to change the course of a performance by interrupting the show and themselves becoming actors who can suggest an alternative that changes the story of the play. In so doing, they identify a variety of potential new solutions in a 'rehearsal for reality'.

Odd Arts aims to enable the learners they work with to develop new possibilities of self-expression through creative workshops that explore relationships, role play, character development and story-telling. Their methods encourage self- and peer assessment and a reflective, embodied approach to learning. The workshops and modules also attempt to demonstrate to professional trainers and educators how drama and the arts can enable the imaginative investigation of difficult life situations and the fears and vulnerabilities they arouse. Participants explore these issues through games and exercises that lead eventually to dramatic scenarios. They are facilitated to explore the complex feelings and conflicted states of mind associated with past destructive relationships and actions, and the participants' desires and hopes for the future.

Self-expression through drama merges with peer education in Odd Arts programmes to build confidence, communication skills and a sense of self-worth. An additional element in the workshops in this evaluation was 'creative leadership', understood both as a sense of internal authority combined with the ability to imaginatively work with and influence others, and as the development of skills and understanding that will contribute to their future work, families, communities and social networks.

Rationale and aims of the programme

The 'Creative Leadership' programme evolved and changed in crucial respects after its inception. At its outset, the programme involved a partnership with an education provider who agreed to provide the venues and facilitate recruitment. The provider runs a number of training centres nationwide designed to work with NEET (not in education, employment or training) learners, either unable to complete or excluded from mainstream education. NEET learners are described in the grant application and project brief as young people who have "shown a resistance to learning, often with additional learning and social needs, poor academic achievements or low-level communication skills and confidence". The Odd Arts

partnership with the education provider came to an end for the purposes of this project after the first run of the module. For reasons extraneous to this programme, this provider was no longer in a position to provide the venues for further work and, with The Paul Hamlyn Foundation's agreement, alternatives were sought with young people in residential care and with adults in prison. The aims of the module remained the same and so, largely, did the method of delivery.

The rationale for the Odd Arts project was that "drama and the arts help to overcome these barriers [to employment] and address young people's lack of confidence, personal awareness, communication skills, and basic self-discipline needed in the workplace, relationships and society". In a previous project, 'Intermix', also funded by Paul Hamlyn, academic attainment among learners improved and staff noted long-term improvements in motivation, attendance, and completion rates (for similar findings, see also Hughes, 2005, Anderson et al, 2011). An important aspect of this success was thought to be the way in which Odd Arts' methods had increased user voice with respect to concerns around refuge, hate-crime, child sexual exploitation, legal highs and homelessness – all topics that are difficult to broach in conventional educational settings.

The aims of the Creative Leadership programme were to:

- improve learner experience and attainment through peer-led, issue-based arts projects
- increase confidence, creativity, communication and team-work skills and therefore increase employability
- inspire learners to take control of their lives and recognise their own potential
- teach creative leadership skills and engage learners in the arts as a means of communication
- prepare learners for ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) Level 1 award in Peer Mentoring (<https://www.asdan.org.uk>).

The evaluation approach

The evaluation was delivered by the Psychosocial Research Unit at the University of Central Lancashire. The team has a combined disciplinary background in the Social Sciences and Humanities and a long track record of researching and evaluating arts-based interventions. In this instance an evaluation team of four researchers combined expertise in education, the arts and humanities, social science based research and work with young people and adults in the care system and in criminal justice settings. Psychosocial research combines a focus on the individual with an understanding of social setting and wider environment. It has at its disposal an array of methods to understand the dynamics of social interaction and the emotional and cognitive transactions between individuals and within groups, including those that are not articulated and often beneath awareness.

The evaluation was both formative and summative, and used action research methods based on detailed ethnographic observations of sessions, which included note-taking,

limited participation, and video-recording and analysis. Recorded observations were analysed by the team working as a panel. Findings were fed back to staff and directors of Odd Arts in iterative cycles, leading to modifications of programme content and delivery, assessment and further feedback. All recommendations were developed in dialogue. The aim was to enable staff to refine the model and build upon its most successful aspects, while addressing those that worked less well. While conducting sessions, staff frequently had to think on their feet, innovate and adapt their techniques to unanticipated material presented by participants. They also had to attend to the dynamics of each group. The evaluation process offered an opportunity for them to articulate what they were doing and why, and to reflect upon the effects of particular strategies and on the unacknowledged psychosocial processes that unfolded during each session.

The overall aims of the evaluation were to:

- improve the design and delivery of the sessions
- characterize Odd Arts' distinctive model of practice
- identify outcomes of the creative leadership module
- refine and embed self-evaluation skills among Odd Arts staff
- enable Odd Arts to better describe and advocate for what they do

Ethical Approval for the study was granted by the Psysoc Ethics Committee at the University of Central Lancashire (reference number PSYSOC 297).

Overview of observed sessions

Locations and environments

We observed the Odd Arts workshops in four different settings and in various facilitator combinations. Although outcomes were slightly different in each of these settings, all of the sessions provided learning opportunities. In three out of the four settings it seemed to make little difference which of the facilitators was in charge of a session. One setting offered a particular set of challenges, which will be discussed in Case Study 3. Even in this case, however, the workshops were a success in terms of engaging participants and building teamwork and performance skills. We attribute this achievement to:

- **Flexibility and adaptability.**
Odd Arts facilitators are responsive, and are able to reacting to each situation with ease and grace, so that if a particular exercise does not work they quickly and seamlessly adapt and find an alternative.
- **Strength and coherence of the Forum Theatre and peer mentoring model.**
The facilitators are confident in delivery, due to their in-depth understanding of the underlying principles of the programme and the strength of Forum Theatre itself
- **Performance and facilitation skills.**
The facilitators are highly skilled in dealing with challenging participants. They exude empathy and attend to detail. They are active listeners and appreciate how

enjoyment and creativity leads to engagement. They are also non-judgmental, enthusiastic and they model positive behaviour.

Exemplary teamwork.

The facilitators demonstrate an unusual degree of professional mutual support in their combined facilitation with participants, demonstrating exceptional ease of coordination with each other, even in difficult moments and even with different facilitator partners from session to session.

The observed sites were:

1. A partner agency and a training and apprenticeship centre, for young people from 14+ who are not in mainstream education, employment or training (NEET Learners). The agency caters for a variety of young people of different ages, genders and support needs.
2. Care for Children, (C4C), Hope House, Preston, a care setting for young offenders, with complex needs, consisting of a large house in a big garden and a separate school building. The group was all male, from African Caribbean, and one from an Eastern European, background, and they had come into care in part because of high risk behaviours and criminal activity connected to gang culture.
3. Care 4 Children, Jefferson House, Winsford, is also a care setting for young people – a group of white males who had been involved in sexually inappropriate behaviour that had aroused serious concerns and/or was of a criminal nature. The building was an old vicarage in large garden, with a separate school building.
4. HMP Wymott, Leyland is a Category C prison including a wing for vulnerable prisoners. Two groups were run: one with Vulnerable Prisoners ages 30-75; (2) Category C male offenders whose average age was 30.

Odd Arts methodology

Process and technique

The Odd Arts method consists of employing a rich variety of exercises and games to engage participants in learning through doing. The 'doing' moves from exercises that elicit issues and problems in the participants' lives, to dramatization of those issues and finally a theatrical performance that can be questioned or altered by the audience in a process of participative problem solving (Forum Theatre). The games are entertaining and a useful method of engagement, slowly building up towards the identification and discussion of issues that are meaningful to the participants. They build thinking skills and reciprocity in their own right, increasing in complexity over the course of the module and progressively incorporating more ambitious theatrical elements as the participants gain confidence. They can also be used to bring light relief from the weight of the real-life problems that emerge as central to the developing drama. The overall sense is one of waves, an ebb and flow between serious and entertaining, which retains the attention and interest of the participants.

The research team were struck by the pace, rhythm and inventiveness of the activities, which were particularly effective with young people with low attention spans and negative attitudes towards learning. The activities were also very varied with participants sitting, standing and moving around, and eventually acting, beginning with freeze frames and ending with a fully rehearsed play. Participants are constantly changing from learning individually, to learning in groups of two, three and four and whole group activities.

Philosophy and approach

The philosophy behind Odd Arts' work is in line with restorative practice. The dramatic medium allows past mistakes, misdemeanours and criminal activities, and the damaged relationships that ensue, to be re-enacted through exercises, games, character development and role plays. The whole process engages participants in a reflection on their behaviour and the lives they envisage for themselves in the future, with a view to developing an agency and ability to work with others. Activities are based on the principle that the participants are more likely to respond to challenges and potential changes that are worked through *with* them, rather than done *to* them. Re-enactment evokes emotional conflicts and moral dilemmas emanating from past situations, as well as prompting the participants to think of the future. This mode of working requires an understanding of how to 'hold' a group and a space, how to maintain boundaries, and how to offer carefully calibrated support. The holding enables a process based on trust and respect rather than prescriptive discipline, and the support is through encouragement, empathy and active listening. Because real issues or problems are confronted through dramatization, difficult personal topics are aired in imaginative scenarios which can be discussed and reflected upon with others. When carried through to its conclusion, the final performance draws the audience into the process of finding a variety of possible solutions to the problems that form part of the drama. This allows for the emergence and consideration of issues that might otherwise have remained hidden. By presenting them in to others, often staff and peers, and in a deliberative and interactive context, troubles that may have a private and/or 'shameful' character become available for collective discussion.

The following example, taken from one of the workshops from Hope House, illustrates the way in which participants draw on biographical experience, which is re-enacted in dramatic form in a rehearsal context which requires team-work. When creating the character for the final performance, it became clear that (in line with Boal's principles (1979)), the life situation of this character paralleled, in many ways, those of the participants.

X was very influential with coming up with ideas for how the scenes would work – very serious “He does it a few times [drug deals for his brother] and then gets caught, and cautioned”. The facilitator asks “Does he go back to it after this?” The participants in unison respond “Yes”. This is clearly set on the trajectory of their lives – The tone of this part of the session is very deep and thoughtful. The facilitator asks “Do things change with his mum?” – X replies “he’s more distant with mum, who doesn’t initially know what is going on. But then she gets a call from school, and throws him out”. He then states that when he, himself, gets thrown out from home, he deals more drugs as he needs money to live, and is trapped in a cycle. The facilitator asks “Do you think that this is the case for a lot of people – they get trapped?” - [I thought this was really good questioning... This conversation was really

interesting to watch as it was clear to see that the narrative was switching between the character's life and X's (and the lives of the other participants' to some extent)] (Observation notes)

In this notebook extract we see in action a key technique described by Boal (1979) where the facilitator takes on the role of the 'joker', a neutral voice that guides the process and asks questions that enable the participants' narratives to become intertwined with those of the fictional character.

The Forum Theatre technique was made even more effective when participants' own cultural interests (in the above example, rap music) were woven into the sessions, and the performance. This increased their engagement and investment in the programme. It also brought to the surface the problematic misogyny and gangster glamorisation of some of the rap lyrics, which the participants would have found acceptable in a gang situation but was unacceptable in the present scenario. This led to participants' self-regulation in the performance, where the content was modified. This is further discussed in the case study.

Examples of activities

The basic structure of activities consists of the following. The activities are susceptible to modification and adaptation according to facilitators' perceptions of the particular issues or problems of a group:

1. Games and enjoyable exercises are used as icebreakers to help participants get to know each other.
2. Teamwork exercises encourage relationships to develop.
3. Participative discussion of emerging issues is encouraged, including identification and elicitation of 'barriers' to personal development and progress in society. These later form aspects of the final performance.
4. 'Continuum' enables reflection on the issues where participants position themselves at either end of the room according to their opinion on an emergent issue. One end of the room represents total agreement while the other side of the room represents total disagreement; there is a 'neither-agree-nor-disagree' space in the middle. Participants are asked to give reasons for their choice.
5. 'Bombs and shields' requires participants to identify others in the room as a 'bomb' or a 'shield' that can protect from the bomb; they move around the room attempting to keep the 'shield' between them and the 'bomb'. This then becomes a way of discussing the 'bombs' and 'shields' in real life.
6. Issues identified for enactment in the final performance are interpreted through a frozen image created by a small group.
7. In developing the central character of the drama, the facilitator draws an outline of a human figure or a head and populates it with facts about that person's life, suggested by the participants. The bombs and shields identified in the previous exercise are included in this discussion.
8. A timeline is created on a long sheet of paper that places this character within the structure of events that make up a play.

9. Forum theatre rehearsals, followed by performance and sometimes 'spect-actor' interventions are followed by debate around which of the different actions constituted the best solution to the problems depicted in the play.

Summary of observations

In the different sites observed, participants gave unanimous positive feedback and it was clear that this was the result of a well thought out programme that was expertly delivered. It was also due to the nature of the work itself: Forum Theatre and associated techniques allowed participants to imaginatively enact life issues so that they became available for thought and discussion. This experience was new for the participants, enabling them to use their life experiences, rather than demanding the formal learning skills with which they had previously struggled and helping them to overcome a reluctance to take part. They discovered talents they didn't know they possessed and gained recognition and affirmation in the process. Strong evidence of their embodied participation came from the vitality of the performances, remarked upon and appreciated by their audiences

For example, the young people in the educational setting for NEET learners who had either been excluded or had dropped out of mainstream education, displayed restlessness, short attention span, lack of respect and tolerance for authority, inappropriate group behaviours and psychological and emotional difficulties. These were not in a contained care setting, which made forming a consistent work group very difficult. They came and went both for good reasons (like job interviews) and for other reasons that were less clearly legitimate. Nevertheless, they managed to pull off a compelling performance, which was sufficiently focused to impress their audience of staff and peers.

In **Hope House (Case Study 2.)** the Odd Arts facilitators drew on the rapping skills of the young people and incorporated these into the final performance. The use of offensive language in defiance of social norms was tolerated in the context of aesthetic expression. The energy, rhythmic skill and poetic originality of the rapping was praised, while the content became a cue for reflection on issues of gang culture that both attracted them and put them in danger. The young people developed a commitment to communicating with their audience in the course of the workshops and they used rap to offer a window onto a sub-culture that they found seductive, whilst exposing its violence and misogyny. There was a fine line in play and the content sometimes seemed to fall outside of the bounds of acceptability; but the facilitation provided a space where this could be recognised and self-censored by the performers themselves.

In **Jefferson House (Case Study 3.)** the Odd Arts facilitators were faced with a highly vulnerable group of young people and tense staff, who did their best to avoid what we can only describe as 'the elephant in the room' – the anxiety aroused by their sexual behaviour that had brought them into care. Furthermore, the implicit contract and relationship between the teacher in attendance and the Odd Arts facilitators had not been clarified and the researchers observed a degree of intervention which could be interpreted as unwitting competition. In this situation the young people were less able to incorporate their real and pressing issues into the workshops. Nevertheless, the final performance was still strongly appreciated by the young people and the audience of parents and staff who attended it.

At **HMP Wymott (Case Study 4.)** the programme was delivered to two groups of prisoners: the first was a group of vulnerable male prisoners (VPs); the second was a group of male Category C prisoners with a range of undisclosed offences. Both of these groups performed well in front of peers and staff. The VPs appeared to be especially engaged and put in a polished performance, which included a significant contribution from the audience as ‘spect-actors’, (where members of the audience make alternative suggestions to alter the course of the performance and/or become actors in the play); the second group appeared to have fewer cultural resources but were nevertheless able to express themselves with authenticity and honesty in a way which is difficult in the prison setting. Both groups received accolades from peers and staff, gave positive feedback and asked for more Forum Theatre work in the future.

Case Study 1: An Education and Training Provider for NEET Learners

Introduction

The educational and training space we observed aims to help individuals with apprenticeships, skills and qualifications that make a practical difference to students’ chances of finding and retaining suitable employment. They are part of the NCG group whose central purpose is

Unlocking potential through learning. That’s the simple goal at the heart of everything we do, working with government, employers and partners to help thousands of people start or develop a career.

The sessions were intended to place an emphasis on improving Maths and English skills, gaining qualifications and work experience and the young people were partially or fully excluded from school.

In total, 10 boys and 7 girls participated at some stage during the Odd Arts programme delivery, of which 4 boys and 3 girls completed the course. The young people’s ages ranged from 16-21.

Opportunities of the Setting

Transition into employment

Unlike the other groups in care or criminal justice settings, this group of young people were living in family and/or community contexts. They were actively engaged with the transition into employment and were free to come and go. As we describe below, this presented its own challenge.

Education/training support structure

The training provider was delivering an educational support service, monitoring progress, and working with the young people on formal educational skills and qualifications.

Challenges of the Setting

Unsuitable facilities and situation for theatre work

The specific setting for each of the Odd Arts sessions varied from week to week, with none of the spaces being ideal for the work, which involves a fair amount of physical moving around. The final space, where the work culminated in a peer led performance for the staff of the centre, was little more than a corridor, with computers lining one wall and moveable panels separating the space from the toilets on the other side.

The first session got off to a difficult start when one of the staff left a mobile phone charging in the computer room and it was stolen. This meant that the group had to be challenged about it. The heavy adult presence, the nature of the rooms, and the incident with the mobile phone were indicative of the edgy, unstable and uncomfortable conditions under which Odd Arts had to work.

Requirements of the Training Context

The following features of the setting had a significant impact on the work

- The young people were not living within an institution and were free to come and go.
- The teaching staff made their presence felt in the first session and introduced the 'leadership' related aims of the learning process in a more overt fashion than was evident in later workshops.
- There was a clear imperative to incorporate skills that were not a natural part of the Odd Arts programme, such as Maths and English.
- There was a greater emphasis on filling in a Peer Mentoring Book, connected to the qualification to be awarded

.

Easily distracted group with short concentration span

Faced with the difficulties of the setting, the Odd Arts facilitators were able to maintain the rapid, flexible and adaptable aspects of their work in a way that kept the process moving, despite frequent challenges from the young people. The quick-fire delivery of the programme meant that any nonchalance or resistance was quickly dissipated. Although the rules of the process are established by the participants and facilitators at the beginning, they appeared to be regarded by the young people as being there to be broken (as in the mobile phone theft). Odd Arts works successfully not through rules, but through the application of carefully thought out, short and entertaining exercises that retain attention from students who otherwise lack the ability to concentrate.

Mixed abilities and levels of confidence

Some of the young people were very shy and reticent about taking part in exercises and games, while others tended to dominate the space and initially had little understanding of how to operate in a group. Odd Arts' delivery is accompanied by tolerance and a non-

judgmental approach that is clearly, if silently, acknowledged by the young people. For example, the following exercise gave an extrovert young person a chance to shine, while allowing another to opt out:

The students are able to demonstrate their abilities. The game that asks them to all touch the piece of paper on the floor without their bodies touching the floor, (the paper gets smaller and smaller until the task appears to be impossible), is worked out by N who tells everyone to hold the piece of paper and all jump into the air simultaneously (teamwork, problem solving, thinking out of the box and leadership). T refuses to participate in this. (Observation notes)

The important point to note is that T is not completely detached from the process. Because she was respected and allowed to stay out of the exercise in a non-judgmental fashion, she could later agree to act in a scene that illustrated the emerging theme of the session, 'barriers'. She also pointed out to newcomers that mobile phones needed to be switched off, indicating a personal awareness of responsibility. What was remarkable about these sessions is that Odd Arts were able to overcome the very substantial obstacles that faced them through empathy, knowledge of their materials, respectful and tolerant attitudes and the pace and rhythm of delivery.

A changeable and unstable group

The sessions were notable for the constantly changing composition of the workshops, with neither the Odd Arts facilitators nor the young people attending all of the sessions. Of the initial group of 6 young people, only two turned up for the next session. Since this was hardly enough for the participative work the training agency had to find other students, at random, to make up the numbers. Even at the final performance, completely new students were being introduced into the group, and only two from the original group were present. Despite these disturbances, the final performance was successful as was evident through the enjoyment of the audience, who were largely staff, and the feedback from the young people themselves:

- ~ It went absolutely amazing!
- ~ I think it was great!
- ~ I'll take away that people can be abused in relationships
- ~ Bit of confidence
- ~ Enjoyed? Been alright..... Yeah.....

(Young people's feedback)

Low expectations and propensity to engage among the young people

The Odd Arts facilitators remain very positive and become role models while being prepared to 'push' the young people towards achieving a piece of theatre work they can take pride in. Whereas the young people are often lacking in hope - "I didn't think all those people were going to watch it at all" – the Odd Arts facilitators demonstrate through their own behaviours what is achievable. For example, B is a newcomer to the group, even though this is the last day leading to performance.

When B turns up, he is apparently suffering from a massive hangover and refuses to join the group, instead he sits behind me. No blame or judgement, [the facilitators] engage with him from the front of the 'room'. And he shouts back from behind me. (Observer notes)

Given his state of mind and the fact that he has not been a member of the group before, it is extraordinary to see how he eventually takes on a role.

B takes on the role of the person interviewing someone who wants a job caring for children. This person has had her drinks spiked the day before and her mind can hardly function. B is seen (ironically, but also appropriately) asking her if she has been drinking and telling her about the consequences of drinking and taking drugs i.e. that she won't get the job with children. In doing so, B expresses and behaves himself like a leader. *In doing so, he is almost speaking to himself, since he is the one with the real hangover.* Accordingly, he doesn't limit himself to only reading the questions from the interview that have been prepared on a sheet of paper beforehand (he told [the facilitator] that he was too smashed to remember anything) but he actually gets into the part and improvises lines, especially about the dangers of drink interfering with a future career. (Observer notes, our italics)

B took on a role that enabled him to speak as expert and his own critic. This is a fine example of how the Odd Arts process leads to the growth of self-awareness and responsibility through the bodily experience, play, creativity, enjoyment and relational intelligence that can be developed through acting. B who would have been unlikely to have responded to moralistic or prescriptive pedagogy incorporated his own painfully evident issues into a performance that could be offered to others who, in turn, could suggest alternative routes and potential for change.

Resistance to formal educational tasks

The above example can be contrasted with the onerous task of completing the exercises in the Peer Mentoring booklet. This was universally hated. Apart from the need to follow the the education and training provider's protocol and evidence formal learning for the purposes of a qualification, there seemed to be no benefit in this task which clashed with Odd Arts' methods. Even in this case, however, the Odd Arts facilitators were able to demonstrate high levels of professional containment in the face of the frustration that this task induced.

N punches the dividers and throws a pen at [a facilitator]. N appears to be hyper, but [the facilitator] takes it in her stride with a joke, so that N's provocation simmers down again. [The facilitators] seem to be able to manage the group with a fair bit of skill and humour, while keeping to task. (Observation notes)

Specific outcomes

As in all the Odd Arts sessions, the finale was a peer led theatrical performance which had been fashioned out of issues that were important to the young people. The skills developed that were relevant to finding and maintaining employment included:

- An experience of recognition
- A boost in self confidence
- A sense of respect and tolerance
- A feeling of agency and decision-making
- A sense of responsibility for one's actions
- The value of teamwork
- The use of one's own experience
- The ability to confront/be aware of sensitive issues, such as mental health or substance misuse

These are also skills that might be useful to leaders, thus reflecting the stated aim of the programme - creative leadership skills. Clearly, to create a peer led performance is to lead. To that extent leadership was exercised and practiced. It seems to us that the palpable outcomes that were achieved, however, were not so much centred around leadership as social skills and self-awareness. The following example demonstrates this difference. When asked how they would spend £100,000, one of the young people responds by saying

... he would spend the £100,000 on opening his own catering business; previously, in discussing leadership he had explained his only leadership experience at school when the class nominated him to be the person responsible for leading the organisation of a charity meal.

(Observation notes)

Although this is partly about leadership, it is more importantly about self-awareness, working with others and establishing a sense of purpose.

The other demands of the course such as improving numeracy and literacy were not a focused part of the learning, although the facilitators did their best to point out that such skills were indeed being used in the course of the programme.

What we learnt about Odd Arts method in this setting

The Hull sessions demonstrated a positive process and the learning of specific skills that can continue to be developed outside the institutional frame:

- The knowledge base supported finely tuned activities and the approach was consistent despite a constantly a changing facilitator and student group.

- The facilitators demonstrated an enormous capacity for emotional containment of the young learners, many of whom were not easy to contain or control.
- The facilitators were sensitive in establishing the parameters of tolerance, respect and engagement versus non-engagement.
- The Odd Arts approach made a difference to students who had struggled with conventional teaching and who enjoyed the chance to exercise responsibility and create something themselves.
- The Odd Arts facilitators were able to role-model positive behaviour rather than instigate discipline prescriptively.
- Facilitators maintained a positive but 'authentic' stance remaining flexible and adaptable to finding solutions to problems arising during the sessions.
- Interest and energy were sustained by the rhythm and pace of the delivery of the games and exercises.
- Wide differences in individual student needs were accommodated.
- The mutual support of two facilitators helped them to 'hold' a disparate and sometimes chaotic group.
- The conclusion of the process with a successful performance, appreciated by an audience of staff from the Training Centre, conveyed a strong message to the young people that, despite poor qualifications, they could build on their own experience to achieve something of value. Inadvertently but importantly, it also showed that it was possible to pull out something tangible out of the somewhat disorganised situation of the group, conveying a hopeful determination to 'keep going'.

Case Study 2. Care for Children, Hope House

Venue

Hope House is a care home, run by Care for Children (C4C), a specialist children's service which works with traumatised and troubled young people with complex and challenging needs, that Local Authorities find difficult to place. Hope House is designed to hold a maximum of four young people with problems relating to gang affiliation/radicalisation, for a maximum of 18 months. It is used for young people who have been caught committing serious gang related offences and who are often referred from the courts. During their time at Hope House they partake in daily education, provided by a qualified teacher, and also have intensive therapy sessions, both as a group and individuals.

There are two buildings; the main home where they live, and then a smaller school, which is set out like a classroom. All but one of the Odd Arts sessions took place in the school building. The exception was the final performance which was held at a local village hall.

Participants and staff

There were four participants altogether, two of whom attended all five sessions, one who attended four sessions, and one who attended the final two sessions only. The participants were aged between 13 and 17. They had all been caught committing serious gang related offences, and they discussed first hand experiences of serious victimisation. Staff members advised that they had all had chaotic, difficult and often traumatic upbringings, and consequently had complex needs and behavioural problems. During the first session it became apparent that the youngest had learning difficulties.

There were four different facilitators from Odd Arts present in some combination throughout the five sessions. A number of C4C staff members were also involved at various points in the process and this had a largely positive impact on the sessions. The staff were respectful of the Odd Arts facilitators, and took the programme seriously, helping to re-enthusiase the young people if they flagged. Their perspectives differed dramatically from those of the young people, which added to the success of some activities. Finally, they helped to 'make up numbers', which was important as some of the Odd Arts activities were better suited to larger groups, and would not have worked as well with only 2-3 participants.

Opportunities of the Setting

A purpose built educational space suitable for theatre work

The work took place in a light, airy comfortable and adaptable, room set apart from the main residential accommodation. However, a young person wishing to leave was always accompanied by a member of the care staff, giving strong sense of physical boundaries and conveying a 'soft discipline' that meant the young people were not at liberty to randomly or impulsively come and go. In many ways the physical conditions were ideal for work with this particular group. Holding the final performance away from Hope House in the Village Hall then reinforced a sense of occasion – and given the audience acclaim – the sense of achievement for the young people

A highly contained, relational setting with a high staff to resident ratio

The young people in Hope House are very closely supervised (three staff members to every young person). Care staff in attendance were friendly and attentive. From what we observed, the work at the facility was relational and emotionally containing and young people seemed to have lively and positive interactions with the educational staff on the premises.

Extrovert participants who enjoyed performing and whose gang related background disposed them to be assertive

These young people had a sub-cultural street style, and 'attitude'. In particular, two of them were accomplished rappers. These are performative skills in their own right and could be turned to good use for the purposes of drama, while allowing them to re-connect with the milieu from which they had come. Some of Odd Arts techniques, such as the 'Bombs and Shields' exercise resonated strongly with them.

Challenges of the Setting

Small numbers and initially a hard group to engage

During the first workshop it was immediately apparent that the participants could be disruptive. The group were initially uninterested, unwilling to engage and somewhat disrespectful (talking over the facilitators). There were instances when individuals refused to participate, and either walked out of the room or sat in silence. In instances where this happened, the facilitators simply carried on, smoothly responding to changes in the group, and pulling an appropriate task from their repertoire in which the others could take part.

By the second sessions these problems had disappeared showing that the Odd Arts technique could turn around a reluctant group very quickly.

I left feeling completely in awe of Odd Arts and the work they do. The demeanour of the participants was completely different to last week; they were all sat up, listening, ready to engage. They looked like they truly wanted to be there, and were pleased to see the facilitators who had made a lasting impression on them from the week before.

(Observation Notes)

Short attention span and disruptive behaviour

After around 40 minutes, the young people would begin to get bored and start to misbehave. Odd Arts were quick to think of strategies to retain interest.

The way that Odd Arts dealt with this was really intuitive, deciding as the day went on that they would shape their activities around this 40 minute 'slot'. As part of this they also decided to shorten the day to end at 2 rather than 3 so that the session could end on a positive note.

(Observation notes)

The inclusion of a new and particularly disruptive participant for the final two workshops posed a further challenge. He arrived in mid-process and was therefore at a disadvantage, which he dealt with by acting out and refusing to co-operate. This dramatically altered the dynamics of the session and could have been dispiriting. The facilitators, in characteristic fashion took it in their stride (thereby modelling resilience). In the final performance, this young person was drawn into the flow of the action and assigned a role as drug dealer

which he took seriously. The ability to turn disruption deftly into participation is a particular skill and also underlined the strength of the Odd Arts method and mind-set.

Disparities in ability within the group

The youngest member had learning difficulties which meant that he often struggled to keep up with tasks, and did not like being put on the spot. At times he appeared out of his depth, which in turn made some of the activities difficult to complete and frustrated the others. However, Odd Arts facilitators persisted in their attempts to include him and he was able to participate in the final performance. This difficulty did raise a question as to whether it might not have been helpful to have had some prior information about how he might function in the group, making it possible for the facilitators to plan accordingly.

Traumatic past experiences of violence and victimisation in gang culture

The boys referred, almost casually, to having been shot at, stabbed, kidnapped. There was a fine balance to be achieved between acknowledgement of the gravity of such events and the upbeat quality of the workshops which is intrinsic to the style and method. The facilitators weave between real-life issues and fictionalised dramatic representations where alternative 'solutions' can be proposed. As the character at the centre of the drama developed it was clear that real-life emotional experiences and moral dilemmas were being projected into this role, problems related to peer pressure, drugs and alcohol and poor family relationships. This allowed participants to consider the character's situation from the 'inside' (through identification) and from the 'outside' (through evaluation and reflection). They were then able to think about the prospects for the character and the decisions he/they could make to take charge of the course of events. This kind of work does not rush into easy stereotypical judgements that authority figures might like to hear and could only be achieved in the context of the trusting, open and honest atmosphere that had been created.

The use of rap: content and style

The use of rap was both an opportunity and a challenge. It is of course vital to respect and make full use of the cultural resources that participants already have. Two of the young people were talented at rapping and enthusiastic about including it in the performance. However, observers were initially taken aback by the misogynistic language and glamorisation of gangster life-style. Discussion of this was handled skilfully in a 'light touch' fashion within the group and, tellingly, by the final performance the young people had taken responsibility to make the rap 'radio friendly'. This self-restraint and discrimination demonstrated a developing awareness of likely impact, appropriateness, and care for the performance that allowed them to communicate with their audience.

Changes in the composition of group – participants and facilitators

We have already commented on the introduction of a new member half way through, which in this very bounded context negatively impacted on the group dynamics. There were also continued changes in the combination of facilitators and in the Hope House staff in attendance. The effect of this was to place the burden of consistency on the method of work and the in-depth knowledge of the method, in style and content, of the facilitators.

Even though the progress of the group was impressive - and this is further testimony to the strength of the method - consistency in staffing such a short module might have allowed trust and confidence to build up more quickly.

Resistance to the workbook

As with the other case studies, the workbook did not work well with this group, who failed to see the point of it, and responded to it with boredom and disdain. It was particularly difficult for the young person with learning difficulties. The attitude of the facilitators to the workbook was also largely negative, with it being presented as an irritating means to an end. The idea seemed to be that participants should quickly get it out of the way so that they could get on with the 'interesting' performance related activities. The observers felt that this conveyed a very poor message in relation to formal learning skills while risking ending the session on a low note. Odd Arts were responsive to the feedback that they should take ownership of this part of the process and design a more congenial way for participants to record their learning in the sessions. The workbook was accordingly changed for a more engaging method of recording (see Case Study 4.)

Outcomes

At Hope House, the Odd Arts model was a great success. The balance between games and serious activities worked well for this group, and the relentless enthusiasm and adaptability of the facilitators shone throughout. The programme clearly had a profound impact on participants, whose behaviour at the end was almost unrecognisable from the first workshop. This transformation highlighted clearly the power of the Odd Arts version of Forum Theatre with groups of this type. This was acknowledged by C4C staff members, who were complimentary about the Odd Arts model and wanted to incorporate it into other activities to evoke similar levels of engagement from the young people.

Specific Outcomes

- Critical self-reflection about life experiences and choices, through the use of Forum Theatre.
- A Boost in self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Development of self-restraint and control so that participants became more compliant in the course of the programme.
- A sense of appropriateness in communicating with the audience
- Development of performance skills.
- A sense of respect and tolerance and of being valued by others
- The value of teamwork
- Pride in the performance itself

What we learnt about Odd Arts' method in this setting

- The Odd Arts model works particularly well in this setting because the participants are able to bring personal biographical experience into their activities and project many of their own conflicts and dilemmas into the fictional characters, so that it becomes possible to reflect upon them in a public setting.
- Incorporating the artistic and cultural interests of participants into the performance enhances their commitment and enriches the process. By the same token it creates a difficulty where (as in the case of some of the rap lyrics) content is inappropriate. Learning to exercise discrimination is an important part of participants' experience, but is difficult for facilitators to manage. Anything interpreted as adult judgmentalism would impinge negatively on the workshop process. The 'solution' we observed here lay in the care for the performance and the audience that was developed through the workshops themselves.
- The strength of the method itself imparts continuity, however the flow of the workshops is to some extent compromised when facilitator combinations constantly change. For some groups this is more important than others. In the case of Hope House, the opportunity to build a consistent relationship with facilitators over the session would have been beneficial
- The introduction of new participants in a closed and bounded small group like this one can have a significant impact on the sessions and must be handled with care.
- Programmes of this type that are challenging and very interactive may require particular support and adjustment for young people with learning difficulties. It would be helpful for facilitators to know of any likely issues in advance so that they can prepare accordingly
- The involvement of staff members can have a positive influence on the workshops when they respect the agenda of the Odd Arts staff and take part in activities appropriately and enthusiastically.
- The workbook does not work well with groups of this type. It can detrimentally affect the atmosphere of a workshop, and undermine otherwise successful sessions.

Case Study 3. Care for Children, Jefferson House

Venue

Jefferson House (also referred to as The Old Vicarage) is a semi-secure care home, run by Care for Children, designed for a maximum of five young males with issues relating to sexually problematic behaviour, who stay there for a maximum of two years. All the individuals at the Old Vicarage had been referred from the courts. The regime combines daily education provided by a qualified teacher, and intensive therapy. Supervision of the young people is very intensive, and as a general rule they are not allowed to leave.

The estate is made up of two buildings; a main home, and a smaller school. All of the Odd Arts workshops took place in the school, including the final performance. Access to the main building was heavily restricted and staff members working inside were cautious and appeared circumspect about the presence of researchers.

Participants and Staff

The four male participants were aged approximately between 15 and 17, and they all attended every workshop. We were informed that all had been accused of committing a sexual offence and we were advised by education staff that they had all been victims of sexual abuse when younger, and had started becoming perpetrators. None of the young people exhibited any overt behavioural difficulties, and they were very compliant and 'well behaved'. During the first workshop, it became apparent that one had a literacy age much lower than his years, and had a support worker helping him during education classes (who remained present during the Odd Arts workshops).

Nearly all of the sessions were facilitated by the same two staff from Odd Arts, and Care for Children staff were involved in the Odd Arts workshops to different degrees. The main teacher attended four of the sessions and participated in parts, and a teaching assistant attended and participated in two of the sessions.

Opportunities of the setting

A generally compliant, thoughtful and well-disciplined group

The young people all wore school uniforms, and as we entered all were seated around classroom tables working. While some were quieter than others, all participants were polite, eager to please and appeared happy to take part. This initially made the running of workshops very easy for Odd Arts as the young people responded thoughtfully to questions such as "would you rather have £100,000 now, or £10,000 for rest of your life" highlighting social issues such as "equality for Muslims" and a personal sense of "meaning". The readiness of the young people to engage reflectively with such issues was their strongest resource and one that can be put to very good use in a Forum Theatre workshop.

Continuity of attendance of participants and staff

The relative stability of the group in terms of both participants and facilitators enabled continuity between sessions and should have favoured the development of trust and

cumulative learning. As we see below further work and a stronger mutual understanding was required between Odd Arts and Old Vicarage Staff in order to fully realise the potential benefits of this situation.

[Dedicated educational facilities, appropriate for the workshops](#)

This was a flexible space and in principle an appropriate facility for drama for a group of this size. There was a sense of firm physical and social boundaries, and the presence of a dedicated support worker was there for the young person with learning difficulties, helping to forestall frustration when confronted with a task he found difficult.

[Challenges of the Setting](#)

[Lack of clarity over role and implicit contract with educational staff](#)

There was a mismatch of expectations regarding the role of educational and support staff within the sessions, which could have unwittingly conveyed the impression to the young people that the Odd Arts workshops did not complement their usual learning programme, and may even have been in 'competition' with it. This highlighted the need in general for a more explicit contract with staff on the premises on how to maintain a supportive background presence, as well as pre- and de-briefing sessions so that their expertise is respected and their co-operation and sense of ownership of the process is secured. Odd Arts facilitators were receptive to this recommendation in a feedback session. The uncomfortable sensation of interference on the part of the resident teacher may also have been connected with the stigma discussed below, as if the teacher felt it incumbent upon herself to 'protect' everybody, including the Odd Arts facilitators, from the unspoken shame of the sexual offences that the young people had committed.

[The shame and stigma surrounding sexually inappropriate behaviour](#)

In line with Odd Arts' usual practice, no specific information regarding the reason for the young people's presence in the care setting was requested or imparted. In this case and in marked contrast to any of the other settings we observed, these issues were not introduced by the participants themselves into any of the drama work. Hence sexual victimisation and offending were never mentioned and yet were present as the 'elephant in the room' that never broke cover and did not feature in the final performance. The social anxiety surrounding sex offenders and minors is acute and we do not know how these young people internalise or disavow this anxiety, but the observable effect in the drama work was to create a situation where the subject appeared taboo and some of the work felt inauthentic. The element of Forum Theatre that involves the projection of personal issues into the role did not visibly occur and two of the boys admitted they were importing plot lines from East Enders. Some intertwining of real and fictional life problems in the characters of the eventual performance must have maintained participants' engagement but the workshops and performance skirted around the pressing problems which had brought them into care. Inevitably this would tend to reinforce the message that their crimes and/or infractions of socially acceptable behaviour are unspeakable. The crucial aspect of Forum Theatre that depends on creating a 'public' forum so that ownership of problems and possible

resolutions can, to a degree, be publicly shared, cannot function in such a situation. The risk here seemed to us to be that an atmosphere of collusive non-disclosure is unintentionally created by default – paralleling one of the central features of sexual victimisation and offending. In the absence of its recognition, discomfort affects the activities of the course – for example, our observer felt unease at a game that quite innocently involved physical touching, without being able to resolve whether or not it was a good idea to include such an exercise. The danger is that suspicion and mistrust seeps into the environment surrounding these young people at every turn, undermining the opportunity to work effectively with them.

Whether and how sexual victimisation and offending can be acknowledged in the context of a short drama course needs to be further considered. We are clear that this would involve preparation and a degree of openness and trust being established with care and educational staff so that firm containing boundaries and agreement over roles, responsibilities and appropriateness can be jointly held.

Final performance folded into a larger event

The Odd Arts performance was incorporated into a larger end of year assembly. This had been put together by the young people themselves and their teacher, and was to be attended by C4C staff and family members. The Odd Arts performance was relegated to the end of the event, and this was somewhat anti-climactic, achieving much less vitality and impact than if it had been staged on its own. There was relatively little energy or will in the end to persist with questions and ‘spect-actor’ interventions. It should be noted, however, that the young people rehearsed well, pulled off their performance as planned and all affirmed that they had thoroughly enjoyed the whole process. Here, we make a distinction between enjoyment and the learning process of Forum Theatre.

Outcomes

Even with the difficulties outlined above, the sessions were still successful in many ways, thanks to the resilience, flexibility and enthusiasm of the Odd Arts facilitators. Their ability to adapt their model to the interests of the young people was again highlighted at the Old Vicarage, so that when it was discovered that one young person enjoyed drawing, different activities were purposely included to engage him.

The Forum Theatre elements of the Odd Arts programme were less successful in this context than they had been at Hope House. A key reason for this relates to the fact that the issues/risk factors which Odd Arts focus on as part of their programme, did not necessarily relate meaningfully to the life stories of the participants. Buchleitner (2010: 98), after discussing the workings of a number of Theatre of the Oppressed based workshops in prisons, observes that “a common issue is that the personal problems of the participants which come up during the theatre work might be too difficult to deal with”. The young people took no initiative in bringing up their own problems creating a ‘generic’ character, an equally generic storyline for the performance. While they enjoyed putting the scenes together and rehearsing them, the atmosphere was that of a ‘normal’ drama class where a

greater distance would be established between fictionalised roles and the personal lives of the actors.

Specific Outcomes

Participation in the Odd Arts programme enhanced a number of skills for the participants, including:

- Boost in self-confidence and esteem.
- Development of acting and theatre skills.
- Willingness to perform in front of an audience.
- The value of teamwork
- Ability to reflect on their own thoughts and opinions.
- Development of an awareness of prominent issues faced by young people, and an understanding of the complex consequences that certain decisions can have on an individual's life.

What we learnt about the Odd Arts model in this context

- Staff members can have a positive impact on sessions, but if a clear understanding of roles and purpose is not established with the Odd Arts facilitators, the potential value of their presence and support will not be fully realised. The contract with educational and care staff in the host facility should be clearly established beforehand and short pre- and de-briefing sessions included to consolidate joint ownership of the process.
- A special feature of the programme is the performance at the end of the process. Since this is important for the performers' self-esteem and gives them a unique opportunity to 'shine' in front of an audience that is important to them (staff and family), the more that can be made of it the better.
- The final Forum Theatre performance is an important opportunity for audience and performers to analyse and consider situations that are important to the young learners in a public setting that is non-threatening, non-judgemental and collaborative. When for one reason or another the impetus for this component is lost the process feels as if it has not been brought fully, and with due ceremony, to its proper conclusion.
- The programme works best when the issues aired that lead up to the final performance are explored through the young people's real-life experiences thus enabling a form of 'rehearsal for reality' (Boal, 1979). Sexually inappropriate behaviour poses a particular challenge in this context and may well require modifications in preparation and technique on the part of Odd Arts.

- In most scenarios it appears that Odd Arts staff prefer not to be given information about participants before the programme starts, and there are good reasons for this in a short course where, for the purposes of the workshops, everyone begins on an equal footing and with a 'clean slate'. However, there are instances where it might be advisable to re-visit this policy where it would impinge on preparation and choice of activity.

Case Study: HM Prison Wymott, Leyland, Lancashire

Introduction

Wymott is a male Category C prison, which has accommodation for both sex offenders and mainstream Category C offenders. Morning and afternoon sessions were run separately for ordinary prisoners and vulnerable prisoners – commonly known as VP's - (many of whom are sex offenders or for some reason particularly vulnerable to bullying or victimisation by other prisoners). Ages ranged from 30-75, with a wider range and older prisoners in the VP category. Seven Prisoners and six VPs completed the course. There were two prisoners who attended one or more of the sessions and did not complete. Given that movement of prisoners appears to be a high risk activity, accompanied by elaborate protocols (see, for example Wincup and Hucklesby, 2007), this may have been a question of institutional priorities taking precedence.

The prison setting

The prison creates a very different context for Odd Arts' work: most obviously the age of the participants and the levels of security that emphasise the punitive rather than the restorative function of the institution (for discussions on the inherently painful and punitive nature of prison see also Sykes, 1958). The observation notes convey important background information about the psychological and emotional realities of the place which necessarily affect educational work and training that occur within its walls:

Walking into this place, giving in your mobile phone, through the double security doors and waiting in the hall while the staff enter and take their kit: chain, whistle and bunch of keys... is a precursor to a very uncomfortable atmosphere typified by iron bars and what seems to me to be disagreeable control. The prisoners wear prison issue clothes (e.g. bright green trousers). We are delayed and we have to sit together at a table in the company of a member of staff while we wait.
(Observer notes)

Female staff and visitors are locked into the toilets by prison officers for their own safety. There is an emergency button available in each room to push and sound the alarm if fighting breaks out. We often pass through double doors, locked behind before the one in front is unlocked. The incarceration of adult men provides a particular series of opportunities and new challenges for the Odd Arts facilitators. The emotional and practical difficulties

associated with carrying out research in the prison setting has been discussed at length by many prison researchers, including for example Crewe (2009) and Stevens (2013).

Opportunities of the setting

Receptivity of participants to drama

Prisoners were very engaged and eager to take part. Although the ordinary prisoner and VP groups were very different, they both entered into the process with considerable willingness and thoughtfulness, in many cases struggling with and overcoming inhibitions and 'performance anxiety'. We attributed this to the fact that a theatrical space offers an unusual opportunity in a prison to try out ideas and roles in 'rehearsal for reality'. We were left in no doubt that for many of the prisoners this was more than a passing distraction but as one put it "a chance to have a different kind of conversation".

Use of theatre to enact real life dilemmas and difficult situations

It was clear that in undertaking the games and exercises and in preparing and conducting the performances, prisoners were enacting moral and relational dilemmas that they had encountered in relation to family responsibilities and criminal activities, and that these dilemmas were recognised and understood by their audience.

The theatre setting makes it possible to address issues of considerable sensitivity. There was a painful and moving moment when one of the VPs was asked what he was proud of, and he replied "nothing". Through the empathic interest of the facilitator, this VP was then able to say that he felt proud of being able to speak after years of training with a speech therapist to overcome a speech impediment. In terms of the Odd Arts facilitation, it seemed to the observers that there is scope in this setting to elicit more thought and emotional effort from participants than the quick-fire style of the facilitation process that we witnessed with younger participants in different settings.

Skills for life and employment

Participants showed more interest than the other groups in the ASDAN qualification at the end of the programme. This should not be under-estimated given the challenges that they know they will face finding employment after discharge (see for example, Prison Reform Trust, 2011). They queried what ASDAN stood for and what it was good for, and were considerably more alert to any benefit it might confer. We would recommend that more time is devoted in the programme to considering this element in the prison context, so that participants can value it as affirmation of what they have learnt.

Following feedback from previous workshops on the drawbacks of the workbook, an engaging series of post-cards had been devised. For example, participants were asked to write a postcard to a past version of themselves containing a wish that they had done or not done something in their past. In other words, they were using their new learning to understand their past behaviour.

Challenges of the setting

The difficulty of sticking to the time and attendance boundaries of a structured programme, when other prison imperatives take precedence

In every case during our visits to the prison, we were delayed for one reason or another, above all because nothing could be put into action without our being accompanied by a member of prison staff; similarly all prisoner movement between sessions was subject to protocols which took time (for similar findings, see also Martin, 2000). The very start of the programme was significantly delayed by a 'lock-down' due to an incident in another wing.

Although Odd Arts facilitators are very good at adapting their programmes on the spot to respond to the requests and needs of participants, the scope for doing so is circumscribed when the sessions are significantly shortened by factors beyond their control. They habitually maintain a fine balance between structured activity and responsiveness and they continued to do so in this situation, but with objectively less control over their own time management. For example, a performance element got dropped from the end of the first session even though it was needed to give a sense of achievement and direction. In the first workshop it appeared that a number of prisoners who had volunteered for the group were not escorted to it for reasons which remained obscure and crucial time was lost waiting for them to arrive.

Paradoxically, this most structured of institutions unwittingly contrived to 'disorganise' the sessions despite the very willing, welcoming and facilitative presence of the education officer, who did everything she could to help the sessions run smoothly.

The potential for heavy security and institutional intrusion to inhibit the sense of freedom and risk-taking required for spontaneity and creative work

Odd Arts facilitators managed this situation very well, demonstrating the strength of their method through the assurance with which they proposed activities and the skill with which they enabled a contained theatrical space to form. To some extent this was a space apart from prison life, and sufficiently different from other educational activities to provide participants with the challenge (and self-exposure) of doing something new. For some this was evidently emotionally risky, and they felt safe enough to acknowledge vulnerabilities to other participants relating to loss, regret, uncertainty, isolation and in some cases longing for family. There was a fair amount of laddish banter in the Category C group - some of it very witty, some of it defensive, however, the games also stimulated conversations that felt authentic and free of posturing. It was evident that for some participants the idea of performing in front of others, even in a small group, provoked anxiety and it is a measure of the facilitative nature of the environment created by Odd Arts, that these men wanted to take part even though they were on the outer edges of their comfort zone.

Working within an institution where adult participants are divested of normal markers of adult status

In view of the fact that the risks and the challenge of participation for this group seemed higher, if anything, than for the young people in the other workshops we observed, we concluded that it would have been a good idea to place the emphasis slightly less on 'having

fun' than on the fact that this is a form of 'work' which entails self-expression, the development of self-awareness, communication and life-skills.

We felt strongly that in this setting the role of the facilitators was to work with the 'adult' in a situation where the person is institutionally infantilised, and in the words of Goffman (1961: 43) "radically demoted in the age grading system". This allows space to find the playful 'inner child' when he can be mobilised in the service of creative acting and performing rather than dysfunctional 'acting out'.

Particular thought needs to be given to choice of exercise in this setting. For example, complex exercises that allowed the VPs to air their considerable breadth of cultural knowledge conferred dignity and strengthened engagement. However, the invitation to the Category C group to take part in the 'conflict circle' where they were invited to shout the last thing that made them angry, required more preparation in an environment where there is a great deal of unresolved aggression. To some of the participants the difference between assertiveness and aggression remained unclear, or if clear, they were unable to manage their feelings accordingly. They would ideally have had more time to work with the emotional fallout of an exercise like this than a course of this length allowed

[The perceived or real threat of manipulative and coercive behaviour in a rule-bound environment where prisoners may be prone to testing limits](#)

We were warned at the outset by prison staff that the VP's in particular were 'in denial' about their responsibility for the crimes of which they were convicted and would endeavour to manipulate or invite collusive agreement. We cite this warning simply as an indication of the level of mistrust and suspicion that pervades the prison environment, regardless of whether or why it is justified.

This situation means that it is particularly important that facilitators are secure and comfortable in their roles and division of labour and mutually supportive in their maintenance of boundaries, so that they are seen as working as a team. In general, the team approach of Odd Arts sessions is impressive, and the mutual understanding of the method, and how it is executed, conveys professionalism and instils confidence. In this situation it was particularly important that each facilitator took charge of part of the process so that disparities of gender, age, and experience could not undermine the authority of any one individual. In one session that we observed how a younger female facilitator who had taken a less proactive role in the direction of the activities was subjected to minor physical contact in clear violation of the rules. Although this was a relatively small infraction and she was not put at any risk, it was nevertheless symbolically important and uncomfortable that it had happened to a younger woman who might have been construed as being in a less powerful position, particularly in an all male environment and in the context of VPs. This is another example, as indicated in the previous case study, where the 'clean slate' approach may not be the most appropriate for the facilitators.

Specific Outcomes

That the programmes for both prisoner groups were an undoubted success was evident through observation and their own comments as well as the lively engagement of the audience of prisoners and prison staff in the Forum Theatre production at the end of the last workshop. The main achievements were:

- Enhanced self-confidence through being able to perform in front of peers and staff
- Motivational experience of gaining voice and being heard
- Increased reflection upon issues that might otherwise have remained unexpressed
- Feeling of empowerment and agency explored in the context of creative leadership within a prison environment
- Increased understanding of the nature of teamwork
- Pleasure in being able to participate in a creative process and an associated understanding of the role of the imagination in coping with problems of incarceration
- A feeling of hope in relation to what might be possible outside prison walls (one VP is actively seeking to train in acting once out of prison)

What we learnt about Odd Arts method in this setting

The skills, dedication, resilience and persistence of the facilitators were all in prominent display throughout the Wymott sessions. In both cases, especially in the VP group, the final performances and the use of Forum Theatre were a resounding success. In the case of the VP group especially, the Odd Arts facilitators were able to completely distance themselves from the performance, and not intervene or perform. This demonstrated the extent to which the VP group was able to take ownership of the process, and, therefore the issues of the process, including the 'spect-actor' interventions at the end. As we have already indicated, this must be connected with the age, education and experience of the men, and demonstrates how a slightly more mature approach to the programme games and exercises might have been suitable in this instance

Some of the advantages of the method as employed with young people needed modification in this context. For example, the speed and rhythm of the activities that worked so well with the younger groups was less suited to the naturally slower and more reflective pace of the older prisoners and their greater capacity for and interest in self-reflection.

These adult prisoners engaged willingly and with evident enjoyment in the games, but given the comments above about the ways in which incarceration can compromise a sense of adult identity, there is a delicate question of how they are pitched which should always be kept in mind. There is huge potential with these prisoner groups to explore life situations reflectively through enactment, and Forum Theatre is a very effective method of engaging

prisoner groups in public conversation on morality, criminality, ethics and justice, based on their own considerable and conflicted experience of these issues.

Conclusions

The Odd Arts Creative Leadership programme has demonstrated the strength of model with learners who have been challenged by, resistant to or vulnerable to learning in formal educational settings. The model is based on is based on two foundations:

1. The **roots of the model** in Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed movement, infuses the philosophy and methodology of Odd Arts workshops which offer an effective approach to thinking about challenging life circumstances, including victimisation, offending and vulnerability. From the first session to the final performance a space is created for self-expression of the participants to flourish in ways they would never have considered possible. The sessions are full of variety and vitality at the same time. This is a winning combination.

2. The **facilitation skills** of the Odd Arts team are characterised by:

- **Flexibility and adaptability:** participant life experiences are woven into the process
- **Drive and commitment:** this is essential to resilience when the sessions hit a low point, attention spans falter or difficult issues affect the group mood
- **Authenticity:** this is essential in building trust to accommodate people's innermost fears, anxieties and negative emotions
- **Listening skills and empathy:** the method is rooted in 'learning alongside' rather than 'education for', active listening and empathy are fundamental skills
- **Enthusiasm and humour:** the sessions combine seriousness with lightness and humour; difficult issues are approached with due gravity, but humour and optimism prevails so that seriousness does not become over-burdensome for the participants
- **Tolerance and respect:** without this ethos it would not be possible to effectively address criminal and harmful behaviours
- **Boundary keeping:** flexibility, tolerance and authenticity are possible because of boundary keeping that is delivered with a light touch but establishes a sense of limits; this both safeguards the creative performance space and models appropriate behaviour
- **Leadership and team playing:** theatre and performance require teamwork which is consistently modelled by the Odd Arts facilitators
- **Energy:** the energy of facilitators provides an injection of vitality when participants are listless and apathetic
- **Openness to learn as well as teach:** the facilitators are also in a learning mode in the sessions and this is noted and respected by the groups

- **Ability to balance the personal and the professional:** the facilitators use their own personal life experiences to enhance their professional work with the groups they engage with
- **Skills in modelling:** the spirit of learning *with* rather than teaching *to* the groups means that the facilitators are able to educate through modelling behaviours and attitudes; this was a very successful aspect of the facilitation process.

The observers were surprised and impressed to note how a change of a team of facilitators in the middle of a programme did not necessarily cause disturbance to the flow of the programme, though in some instances it would have helped with continuity and building up trust. This demonstrated well thought-out planning based on shared understanding among facilitators. It also accounts for the ease that facilitators displayed when working together, with one facilitator being able to move into role for a particular game or exercise with seamless efficiency.

This combination created a shared third space between the reality of individuals' lives and the fictionalization of theatre, with the fiction being turned back into reality through the intervention of the 'spect-actors' during the final performance. Because the build-up to final performance was created and experienced by the participants themselves *with* and not *by* the facilitators, the effect was powerful and potentially life changing. Several participants specifically mentioned this in their feedback after the end of the programme. It would be valuable to track longer-term impacts over time, especially if the learning were followed up through the ongoing education provided by the institutions responsible.

General Outcomes of the Programme

Working with vulnerable and challenging participants

The Odd Arts project works towards a holistic understanding of the problems, issues and disadvantages experienced by vulnerable or disadvantaged people. It acknowledges that (1) issues that vulnerable people feel are sometimes difficult to discuss; and (2) these same issues are frequently multiple, overlapping difficulties rather than clearly identifiable problems. This recognition of the complexity that accompanies vulnerability is corroborated by the 2011 DFE report 'Understanding vulnerable young people: Analysis from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England'.

The multifarious nature of the issues that are embedded in the lives and social structures of the vulnerable people who engaged with the Odd Arts programme, are at once indicative of the difficulty of achieving any clearly definable outcome and also a validation of the experiential process employed by Forum Theatre.

Responding to needs

The Odd Arts Forum Theatre engagement with vulnerable and excluded people is defined by process before outcome. That is to say, the results of engagement emerge from a learning situation that is shared with the participants in such a way as to allow the shared experience of participation, drama and performance to merge with the personal life experience of each

individual participant. The teaching and learning process is therefore not one of a pre-set content being presented by an authority figure to a recipient learner, who would subsequently be expected to demonstrate a learning of a previously specified outcome. The process is restorative, in the sense that it does not prescribe definitive solutions but relies on agreement. The agreement aimed at between facilitators and participants is to create a process and a shared project that addresses needs that emerge during the workshop process. The actual participation and engagement of the people involved in the sessions, is in itself an outcome. The process, therefore, is in itself the single most important outcome, as the diagram below illustrates.

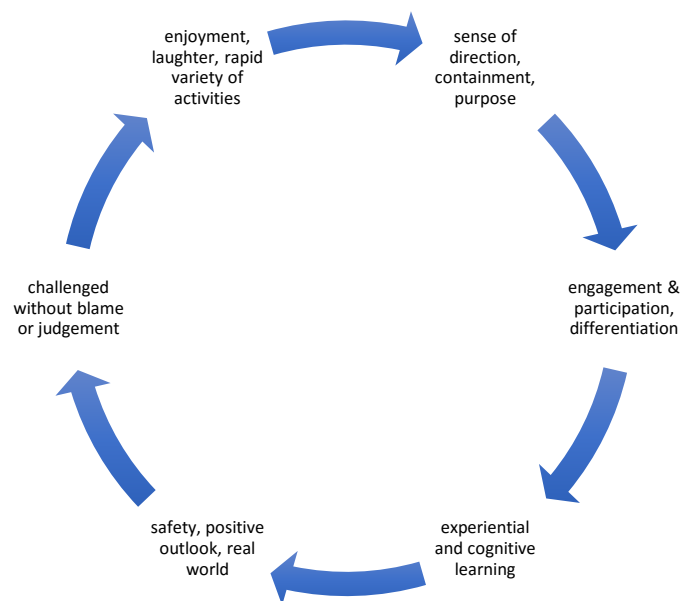


Figure 1 Odd Arts process as outcome

Relational, communication and teamwork skills

The results we recorded respond to the aims of the Creative Leadership programme, in which increasing employability is a key concern. They include:

1. **Enhanced self-confidence:** being able to perform in front of peers and staff in ways that elicited admiration and approval, leading to the raising of self-esteem and a re-evaluation of past 'failures' into future opportunities. An example of this was a participant using his personal experience of substance misuse to warn of the perils of drinking if a person is to succeed in a job interview.
2. **A valuing of creativity as an opportunity for future recognition:** this was especially evident in Case Study 2. when creative self-expression through rap was purged of its misogynistic violence and transformed into a positive means of audience recognition.

3. The motivational experience of being heard through theatre: this was new for all participants instilling a sense of purpose . All the case studies demonstrated a huge boost in morale through the rehearsals and final performance.

4. Ability to reflect upon meaningful and apparently intractable issues that might otherwise have remained unexpressed: three of the case studies we observed were able to encourage the expression of difficult issues which were otherwise likely to be suppressed. In one case study where pressing problems were not brought into the forum vitality of engagement was lost, even though this was a willing and hard-working group. When an issue is transformed from a hard fact of an individual's life into a resonating fiction that all can share, then it is released for public discussion. The Forum Theatre technique also assumes a discussion through an exploration of alternative scenarios.

5. A feeling of empowerment and personal authority was developed highlighting aspects of creative leadership rather than rule-bound discipline: this was notable in Case Study 4, where prisoners relished being given responsibility for designing and performing their own play inviting the Governor to watch them perform, thereby switching a disciplinary authority for a self-empowered and self-assigned leadership.

6. Increased understanding of the nature of teamwork: vulnerability is often accompanied by isolation whereas the Odd Arts' programme is based on breaking down of barriers to relationship through games, exercises, role play, tableaux and final performances.

7. Pleasure and release in the creative process of theatre, and an understanding of the role of imagination in coping with problems of incarceration: one of the prisoners, as a result of the course, was interested in pursuing theatre studies once out of prison.

Responding to programme aims

The Odd Arts sessions in this study have admirably fulfilled the aims of the programme. Those who completed the course achieved an ASDAN award in peer mentoring. This award may be useful for vulnerable people's efforts to find and secure employment, and perhaps this is especially true of the prison population. Clearly, the prisoners were delighted to receive their certificates. We believe, however, that this visible outcome is only a smaller part of the achievements of the participants and the Odd Arts facilitators. The major achievements are, as suggested above, subtle and potentially long lasting because they are based on life experience, re-enacted and transformed in performance. This was recognised by most of the staff and managers that we spoke to in the different institutions. The teacher of Hope House, the Managing Director of C4C, our contact at HMP Wymott, all expressly and enthusiastically endorsed the programme and its potential to support their work with the people in their care.

Odd Arts methods proved to be a very effective in supporting learners to consider how they might confront wider social challenges. They learnt critical self-evaluation skills and gained in emotional literacy and self-awareness. In a short space of time they gained significant cultural and relational competence which should contribute to their finding employment and navigating the world of work.

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